

# The Civil War

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Americans still argue about the cause of the Civil War. Some say the main cause was the question of enslavement. Others disagree. They argue that the North and South differed over many other issues, like protective tariffs and states' rights. However, all these issues in one way or another involved enslavement. In addition, after January 1, 1863, ending enslavement became an official Union goal. On that date, President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation went into effect. As you should know, this proclamation freed all the enslaved people in the rebellious areas of the South. Clearly, from that point on, a Union or Northern victory would end enslavement in the South. This gave African-Americans a strong and deep interest in the outcome of the war.

The Civil War was the bloodiest and most bitter war in American history. Though not the first war fought on American soil, it did more damage to American civilian homes, farms, and businesses than any other war in our history. The war deeply divided states and even families. Which side would win was not at all certain, even though the North had more manpower and industry. The Confederates were fighting on their home turf. This gave them some advantages. They knew the land better. They were nearer to their supplies. The whites who lived near where the fighting took place willingly gave the Confederates help and information. The Confederates also had the easier task. To win, all they had to do was not lose. A tie was as good as a win. As long as the Confederates held off the Union, they were winning. If they could hold on long enough, the Union might tire and leave them alone. On the other hand, the Union could not win with a tie. To win, the Union had to conquer the Confederates.

African-Americans played a very large role in determining the outcome of this terrible war. Although the Union certainly had the most important advantages in their favor, actions of African-Americans offset some of the few advantages the Confederates had. In addition, African-Americans now had a chance to show how much they really wanted freedom. Unlike the revolts of the past, they finally had a decent chance to fight and win. This is the story of their contributions during the Civil War.

## Learning about the War

In order to influence events, one needs to know what is taking place. How much did the enslaved African-Americans know about what was happening at that time? Most could not read. Many owners were careful not to talk too freely in their presence.

Despite these barriers, African-Americans found ways of keeping up with the war news. One Beaufort man remembered his father crawling under the house to listen to the master reading the paper aloud to the mistress of the plantation. A woman who worked as a maid remembered having an uncle who could read. When the master did not want her to know what he was talking about, he would spell out the words to his wife. You may remember your parents doing this when you were too young to read. Well, this young woman may not have been able to read, but she certainly could memorize! She pretended not to listen, but memorized the letters. Then she went to her uncle and told him the letters. He explained their meaning.

As the war progressed, enslaved African-Americans heard of battles being won and lost. They saw Confederate soldiers returning home to recover from wounds. White South Carolinians could



*Lincoln in Frogmore. A modern painting using housepaint on roofing tin by Thomas Samuel "Sam" Doyle (1906-1985) captures the sense that Lincoln dramatically changed the lives of the people of Frogmore. It shows Lincoln coming to recruit African-Americans for the Union Army. Although Lincoln did not actually come, those who lived there felt he came in spirit. Reproduced with permission of Louanne LaRouche. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African-American Art in South Carolina," organized by the Columbia Museum of Art.*

not conceal their excitement or distress when they received war news. After all, the war was the most important event in their lives. Enslaved African-Americans learned by watching and listening.

Even though enslaved South Carolinians had strong feelings too, most were careful to keep their feelings secret. To do otherwise could have been dangerous. Showing too much feeling cost eighteen-year-old Amy Spain of Darlington her life. Late in the war, as General Sherman's troops were marching across the state, Spain and others heard Union troops were coming. They stopped work. They told the masters in no uncertain terms that they were now free. Amy was accused of using foul language and of theft. A Confederate military patrol arrested her and a number of others. The soldiers whipped the men and sent them back to their homes. Amy was particularly stubborn. After her whipping she cursed the soldiers. The Confederate military tried her and sentenced her to death. Only two hours later, Amy Spain was hanged in Darlington's town square.

### **Work Slowdowns and Stoppages**

What contributions did South Carolina African-Americans make to the war? The first kind of contribution involved labor—lost labor. Even more than before the war, the South needed their labor. African-Americans were needed to grow the crops and keep the economy going. White men could offer little help because most were fighting. As time passed more and more whites went off to war. They were not around to see that the work on the plantations was done. Now the conduct of the enslaved African-Americans depended on their loyalty to the masters and their obedience to the masters' wives. Enslavement had always been a contest of wills between the owners and those enslaved. Now power was shifting in favor of the enslaved. Some of them continued in the old ways. They worked out of habit, fear, or respect. Others saw that this was a new day.

Enslaved African-Americans took advantage in several ways. Some refused to follow orders. The older men and the women who were trying to run the plantations gradually lost more and more control. Enslaved people worked at their own pace, or they refused to

work at all. Like many masters, James Hammond of Beech Island found controlling the enslaved African-Americans on his plantation more difficult. When they heard the sounds of war, their attitude changed. Although they did not flee, they no longer feared him. They let him know that they would now decide for themselves many of the things he had decided for them in the past.

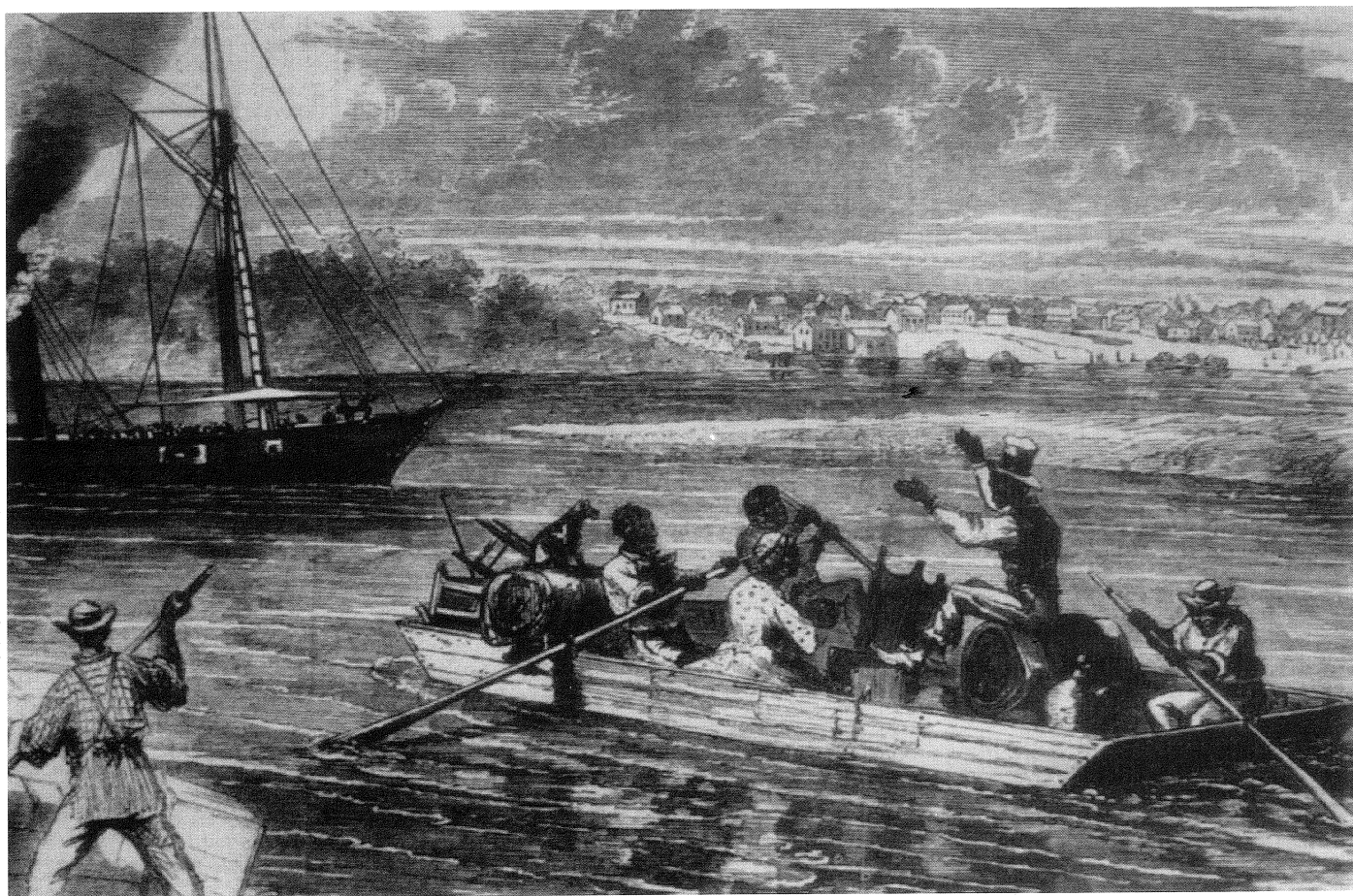
## Fleeing Enslavement

The second way enslaved people reacted to the “new day” brought on by the war was leaving the plantation. Now, after many long years of enduring insult and injury, thousands found the courage to do what they had long dreamed of doing. They struck a blow for their own freedom by walking toward the Yankee Army.

Early in the war in South Carolina, this meant going to the coast near Beaufort. There, in November 1861, the Union forces took control of the Sea Islands. The whites fled inland. Ironically, at first the North also treated African-Americans as property. However, this time African-Americans had a self-interest to be treated as property. The Fugitive Slave Law was still in effect. If these people were still legally the property of American citizens, they had to be returned. However, as the property of the enemy, they did not have to be sent back. Northern troops allowed them to remain as the “contraband of war.”

The phrase “contraband of war” dated back to an incident when a particularly arrogant Confederate officer called a temporary truce. He then rode to the Union side and demanded that the Union troops return enslaved African-Americans who had run away.

*Whenever they had the opportunity, many enslaved African-Americans fled to the Union side taking with them as much as they could carry from their former masters. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., The History of S.C. Slide Collection, slide B-89 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library-USC.*





*Volunteers form the First S.C. Regiment just after receiving the flag they would be fighting under, the “Stars and Stripes” of the United States of America. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., The History of S.C. Slide Collection, slide B-100 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Courtesy of S.C. Historical Society.*

The Union officer refused, saying that it was not customary practice to return to one’s enemy the “contraband of war.” This meant that, in effect, those African-Americans who had fled were free. Actual legal freedom came more than a year later through the Emancipation Proclamation.

Word spread from plantation to plantation. Soon enslaved African-Americans all over the state knew that the Yankees were bringing freedom with them. All they had to do was get to the Union side. So they flocked to the Beaufort area early in the war. No other major Union attacks on the state took place until late in the war. When General William T. Sherman’s huge army entered South Carolina from Savannah in early 1865, African-Americans flocked to his side.

### **Providing Information to Union Troops**

A third contribution that African-Americans made to

the Northern side was providing information. Union troops did not know the terrain. They did not have sympathetic civilians to help them as did the Confederates, but Union troops did get a lot of help. Enslaved African-Americans knew the land. They knew about Confederate troop movements. They knew where supplies were stored. When they provided this kind of information, it hurt the Confederates and helped the North. As they went to the Union lines for freedom, they took with them a great deal of information that would help the Union Army win their freedom.

### **Fighting for the Union**

The fourth and most dramatic way of responding to the “new day” was volunteering to serve in the Union Army. In November 1862, Sea Islanders became the first enslaved African-Americans to enlist as soldiers in the Union Army. What better way to thank an army than to volunteer to fight for it?

Northern whites were not sure how men who had been enslaved would respond to the demands of military service. Almost all whites in those days felt prejudice toward blacks. So the Union Army conducted an experiment. They formed the First Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers. White officers led this unit, with Colonel Thomas W. Higginson as its commander.

The volunteer African-Americans proved to be excellent soldiers. They fought with great courage under some very dangerous conditions. Colonel Higginson led them in their first action in January 1863. Following the war he wrote a book about the exploits of his unit entitled *Army Life in a Black Regiment*. He had high praise for what his men accomplished. He wrote that they fought their way down into Georgia and Florida, had many battles with Confederate troops, and always won. He and his officers felt that using African-American troops would be a key to winning the war because they had more personal reasons to fight. They were fighting for their own people. He found them to be braver and to fight harder than the best white troops. He said he would not even try to do with white soldiers what he had successfully done with the African-American soldiers of the First Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers.

Prince Rivers, who was once enslaved, became a sergeant in the First Regiment. He was asked if most enslaved African-Americans would fight for their freedom. His answer reflects centuries of distrust between whites and blacks. "Yes sir," he replied. But he added that African-American soldiers had to be absolutely certain that whites were asking them to fight for their own freedom. Rivers fought hard and well. After the war he helped his former fellow soldiers organize a group to buy land. He later became a state legislator and a judge in the small town of Hamburg, which once stood near where North Augusta is today.

The First Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers was just the beginning. A total of 5,462 South Carolina African-Americans served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Other Southern states had more volunteer soldiers, however, because the Union Army saw so little action in South Carolina until near the end of the war.

Nearly 200,000 African-Americans in all served in the Union. This was about ten percent of all the

Union's troops. Many of those also certainly had a South Carolina connection. Most African-Americans who became enslaved were transported through the state and many Northern African-Americans had fled from enslavement in South Carolina. African-Americans fought in around 400 different engagements with Confederate forces. They suffered very high casualties and showed great bravery. Any African-American wearing a Union uniform had to be brave. The South had announced that captured African-American soldiers would be treated not as prisoners of war, but rather as traitors. They would be killed immediately. Although the South did not always follow through on

*Photo of Civil War veteran Smart Chisholm by Elise Harleston. In his old age he said he was ready to go again. Courtesy of Edwina Harleston Whitlock. From "Conflict and Transcendence: African-American Art in South Carolina," organized by the Columbia Museum of Art.*



this promise, many were killed immediately after capture. If anything, this caused African-American Union soldiers to fight even harder. By the end of the war, twenty-one African-American soldiers won the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The African-Americans who enlisted in the Union Army were experiencing something new. For the first time they knew the full meaning of freedom. Now they had the job of winning freedom for others. Those others included their own families and friends. They responded by fighting with a fury that their own officers found shocking. They were also winning new respect from whites. After hearing about their performance, the editor of *The New York Times* was impressed. He wrote that their deeds were reducing prejudice. He went on to say that anyone who did not think African-Americans had courage was being proven wrong by their actions as soldiers.

The most famous unit of African-American soldiers in the Union Army probably had only indirect ties to South Carolina—the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. This unit was commanded by the young white Colonel Robert Shaw of Massachusetts, but its soldiers were all African-Americans. Their action on the evening of July 18, 1863, removed any doubts about their courage. Shaw had asked his superiors for an assignment that would put his regiment to the test. He got it.

They were ordered to lead an assault on Battery (Fort) Wagner, which protected the city of Charleston. The only approach was over a narrow stretch of sand, guarded by a heavily armed Confederate force. After a march of several hours, the men of the 54th charged into the guns of Fort Wagner. Crossfire from Fort Sumter hit them as well. Despite this furious hail of fire, which cut their ranks to shreds, most of the men charged on until they swarmed into the fort itself. Colonel Shaw was killed. Without him the men fought on until the failure of other units to reinforce them made retreat necessary.

Although Shaw and his men did not take the fort, they won a more important victory. They defeated the prejudice of many Northern whites who doubted their ability and courage. Angelina Grimke Weld, a South Carolina-born white abolitionist, noted the effect this battle had on public opinion. She said it forced “all

men to see the sin and shame of enslaving such men.” General Ulysses S. Grant wrote, “by arming the Negro we have gained a powerful ally.”

The popular motion picture *Glory* tells the story of the 54th in a most dramatic way. African-Americans who live in Charleston today were deeply moved by this story that took place in their own backyard. Their excitement led them to form a reenactment unit, complete with uniforms and equipment, to help celebrate and remember the sacrifices of the 54th.

Despite all these heroics, prejudice was still alive. The Union Army paid African-American soldiers less than white soldiers. There were other battles yet to be won. Some of these battles would continue for more than a century.

## Robert Smalls

Individuals also found dramatic ways of contributing to freedom. One such person was Robert Smalls. Born into an enslaved family in Beaufort, Smalls and his family had been taken to Charleston at the time of the war. Their master hired out Robert and his brother John to work as assistant pilot and assistant engineer on a steamboat named the *Planter*. The brothers learned the waters of Charleston harbor well. Robert devised a plan to deliver the *Planter* and its valuable cargo into the hands of the Yankee fleet that was blockading the harbor. He planned very long and carefully. The night of May 12, 1862, was to be the night of action. The white Confederate officers were all off the ship for the night. Because the boat made supply deliveries to Fort Sumter at all hours, starting the engine late at night aroused no suspicion. The wives and children of Robert and John boarded the boat. This also aroused no suspicion because the women often brought supper to their men. Soon the *Planter* slowly moved into the harbor and headed toward Fort Sumter.

Around four o'clock in the morning Smalls sounded his signal whistle as he neared the Confederate held fort. The drowsy guard must have nodded at the familiar sight. By the time he realized what was happening, nothing could be done. Smalls revved the *Planter's* engine and raised a white flag on her mast. The flag signaled surrender to the waiting Union ships. Luckily for Smalls, the Union Navy held their fire.



*Civil War hero, state legislator, U.S. Congressperson, public servant, and delegate to the 1895 Constitutional Convention, Robert Smalls, who was once enslaved, saw a full cycle of rising hopes and failed promises during his life. A Gilbert Stuart painting. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., The History of S.C. Slide Collection, slide C-135 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Courtesy of Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, S.C.*

Smalls turned the *Planter* and her cargo of military supplies over to the United States Navy.

Congress rewarded Smalls, and he voluntarily served in the U.S. Navy for the rest of the war. He guided ships through the dangerous coastal South Carolina waters. After the war Smalls turned to politics. We will learn more about that later in the book. Although his story was quite dramatic, Robert Smalls was just one of thousands who helped the Union win the war.

## Susie King Taylor

We know little about the activities of individual African-American women in the Civil War. One woman we do know about is Susie King Taylor. Few women played as great a role as Susie King Taylor. Her account, written in 1902, gives us the story of the war from a woman's point of view.

Unlike most African-Americans of her time, Susie learned to read and write during her childhood in Savannah. Along with her brother and sister, she lived with her grandmother. A friend of her grandmother taught her to read even though this was illegal. So she and her brother learned to hide their books when they walked to their lessons. Later on, this skill served her well when she traveled with African-American Union soldiers. Many of the soldiers wanted to learn to read and write. She gave them lessons when they were not working or fighting.

Susie King Taylor was one of the 500,000 enslaved African-Americans who escaped to the Union forces during the war. In April 1862, she escaped with her uncle and his family from Savannah, Georgia. She married Edward King, who became a soldier with the First S.C. Volunteers. Although the regiment hired her as a laundress, Susie King spent most of her time nursing the wounded and the sick. For more than four years, she served without pay. Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, may have inspired her. Barton met King when both were in Beaufort. Susie King had little fear of illnesses such as smallpox, which killed many soldiers. Writing her recollections nearly forty years later, she related that she regularly drank sassafras tea to stay healthy.

King experienced all the horrors of war firsthand. She felt the cold. She saw the disease and the horrible wounds of the troops. She saw the discrimination faced by African-American troops fighting for the Union. At first the Army issued the men red clothing, which the enemy could easily see from a distance. The men received no pay at all for the first year and a half. In order to support their families, their wives had to do washing and baking for the white officers. In 1863, the Union Army offered the men half-pay. They turned it down. Despite the support of their officers, the Union Army did not give the men full pay, including what they were owed in back pay, until 1864.

At times, badly wounded men had too little food to eat. Often King had to be creative to help them. Some of the men asked for soup, but there was none. So she made a custard from condensed milk and turtle eggs. She had no idea how it would turn out, but it was a great success with the soldiers!

King traveled with the troops on some of the long marches through South Carolina, Georgia, and even into Florida. Filling in wherever she was needed, she learned to clean and reload weapons. She learned to shoot a musket. Sometimes she cooked for the soldiers. When the troops were stationed near Beaufort, she often visited the soldiers who were hospitalized.

Under wartime conditions, you needed ingenuity. Staying warm was difficult during the long winter nights. The military did not allow fires at night because this could alert the enemy. Susie King found a way. She took an iron mess-pan full of hot coals from the daytime fire, covered it with another pan, and brought it back to her tent. No one could see any light, and she was not cold.

After the war, King and her husband moved to Savannah, where she taught school and where her son was born. When her husband died, she worked as a laundress to support her child. Later she moved to Boston, where she remarried and helped organize a chapter of the Women's Relief Corps. Susie King Taylor was a remarkable woman.

## **African-Americans in the Confederacy**

At the time of the Civil War, about 400,000 African-Americans were enslaved in South Carolina. As you learned earlier, 5,000 South Carolina African-Americans served in the Union forces during the war. As you have read, they fought hard and fought with courage. Tens of thousands of others helped the Union cause in other ways, short of actually fighting. Others stayed where they were, at least until the Union troops came near their homes. But some helped the Confederacy. Most had no choice in the matter, although a very few did volunteer to fight on the Confederate side. The Confederacy used most African-Americans as forced labor, building and maintaining defenses.

White South Carolinians worried about the loyalty of their enslaved work force. They had reason to

worry. Enslaved people had revolted in the past. When the Confederate Congress considered drafting white men into the Army, some objected. They worried that the draft would take too many whites away from their task of supervising the enslaved African-Americans. This would make revolt easier. To answer this fear, the government said that it would not draft anyone who owned twenty or more enslaved people. The government also permitted anyone drafted to avoid service by providing someone else as a substitute. This law obviously favored wealthy white citizens over poor whites.

The value of 400,000 enslaved people could be great if they could be put to work in the war effort. The Confederate state government wanted to make the best use of all this labor. So it forced owners to give some of their enslaved labor to the war effort. The legal term for this is "impressment." The enslaved men who were impressed did many tasks. They built and repaired roads, bridges, railroads, and forts. They built Fort Sumter, where the war started. Others who were impressed worked in factories. Many also served in the Confederate Army, although almost none in traditional military roles. Most of the cooks for the Confederate Army were enslaved African-Americans. So were many of the those who handled the horses and mules for the supply trains.

Some whites wanted to make better use of this vast Army of enslaved labor. They wanted to arm them as soldiers. The idea caused a great controversy in the Confederacy. It raised many questions. Would enslaved soldiers fight? Would they turn on their fellow soldiers in gray? What would be done with them after the war? How could enslavement be continued if enslaved men were armed and fighting for the cause? The debate lasted a long time. The Confederates often liked to claim that their enslaved African-Americans were loyal. However, the Confederates must have had some real doubts because they were so reluctant to trust them with guns!

Near the end of the war, the Confederates became so desperate that they did try to use enslaved soldiers. Although the South did form a few small companies, the effort was too late. The war ended before any had a chance to fight. Would it have worked? Probably not. That any large number of African-Americans would willingly serve the cause of



*While the overwhelming majority of African-Americans chose to side with the Union forces if they had a choice, Henry "Daddy" Brown, a free African-American brick mason, chose the Confederates. He served with them as a drummer. This photo was taken a few years before his death in 1907 as he posed with his old drum in front of the Confederate memorial in Darlington. Courtesy of the Darlington County Historical Commission.*

the Confederacy is hard to imagine, especially after the Union promised to end enslavement.

## Revenge

As the "bluecoats" of the Union Army pushed further into the state late in the war, many enslaved African-Americans now had the chance for revenge.

Many of them struck back at the masters, the overseers, and at the system of enslavement itself. On some plantations, angry African-Americans took the whites' possessions. They destroyed anything they could not take. However, the Union soldiers did much more looting and burning than the "freedmen," as African-Americans who were no longer enslaved were called. Surprisingly, with few exceptions, freedmen rarely physically attacked whites. Some freedmen showed pity on their former owners. For example, Joe was an enslaved African-American on the Darlington plantation of A. C. Spain. This was the same A. C. Spain who had enslaved Amy Spain, whose hanging you read about earlier in this chapter. When Sherman's troops passed through Darlington, Joe hid all of Spain's livestock, including mules, horses, cattle, and even hogs, in Swift Creek Swamp. Joe passed up a good chance to ruin his former master.

## Looking toward Rebuilding

Most African-Americans were not thinking about revenge. They wanted to rebuild their lives and families in freedom. Their labor had created the wealth of the state in the first place. However, the war had destroyed much of that wealth. Perhaps now, with a little help, they could rebuild the state and their own lives as a free people. As they looked to the future, they wondered whether their dreams would finally come true.

